



IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF OUR FATHERS
IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED...
Avos Perek 5 Mishna 26
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There are two things a Jew never stops working on: teshuvah, and his diet. Every day we strive to be better. Each challenge is new, never the same, and we try to conjure up new energy to not only preserve but to grow. Oh, and as for the diet issue, well, we do try to control that as well.

The Mishnah tells us:

Ben Bag Bag says; Delve in it (the Torah) and continue to delve in it, for everything is in it; look deeply into it; grow old and grey over it; do not stir from it, for you can have no better portion than it.

Ben Hei Hei says; the reward is in proportion to the exertion.

The challenges of life seem sometimes to be overwhelming. We try, we fall, we want to be good, yet, well, like the eternal dieter, there is always just one more slice of chocolate cake that seems to be begging to be eaten. Sometimes we give up, never happily and often feeling sad afterwards, but the pull is too strong and we falter.

“Our failures and imperfection are given to us to build upon, and to learn from”

Something I saw recently from the sefer *Olas Shabbos* stirred my heart and I want to share it with you.

Chazal teach (*Bereishis Rabbah* 3:7) that before the world (as we know it) was created, Hashem created numerous other worlds and destroyed them.

Simplistically, it seems that Hashem needed a few attempts until He “found the right recipe” for the universe, not unlike the housewife who needs to burn a few cholents before getting it right. Obviously, though, the analogy is way off the mark. Had Hashem so desired, He could easily have “got it right the first time.” Why then did He choose to create the universe in this fashion? Rabbi Tzadok Hacoen explains that Hashem wanted to set an example for all creation: The best construction must come on the heels of previous failure. To build properly, one has to suffer destruction – to see his handiwork fall apart – and then start building again.

When failure is used to ensure greater eventual success, then the failure itself becomes an integral part of the creation process.

The Gemoro (Bava Metzia 84a) tells the story of Reish Lakish, who was once an outlaw of great renown, until a chance meeting with Rebbi Yochanan, who, after witnessing Reish Lakish's great strength, told him that if he would dedicate his immense energy to Torah study, then R' Yochanan would give him his sister as a wife.

The rest, as they say, is history. Reish Lakish became the brother-in-law of R' Yochanan, and emerged as one of the great Torah scholars of his generation.

Many years later, there was a discussion in the beis hamedrash regarding daggers and swords – at which point they are considered ready for use (and thereby become susceptible to tumah). R' Yochanan and Reish Lakish argued the point, the latter claiming that they are not truly ready for use until they have been cooled with water.

Apparently, the discussion became quite heated, until at some point R' Yochanan blurted out in frustration: "You, Reish Lakish, should know – after all, does not a bandit know the tools of his trade!"

Reish Lakish retorted, "If so, why did you do me a favour of channeling my strength into Torah study?"

There they called me Rebbe i.e. head of the bandits and here they call me Rebbe!"

The Gemoro says that R' Yochanan became depressed by Reish Lakish's answer, and could not be consoled.

Yet what did Reish Lakish say that was so offensive to R' Yochanan? On the surface, it appears that R' Yochanan's words were the crueler of the two!

R' Tzadok explains that what Reish Lakish was telling R' Yochanan was the following: "Indeed, it is as you say – I was once a great thief. But I did teshuva; I built upon my failures, and because of this my Torah is indeed greater than yours, for you have known in your life nothing but success.

You mockingly refer to my days as a thief, yet I proudly declare that it is indeed only as a result of this that I have attained such great levels of Torah scholarship, greater than you will ever know!"

R' Yochanan was offended by his words, and could not be consoled.

Of course, one should never seek failure in order to bring about the eventual success that follows.

But failure is all around us – it is an integral part of being human. Often, we become disheartened by our lack of perfection, by the constant give-and-take of everyday life.

Wouldn't it be nice, we cry, to just always do the right thing and not make so many mistakes? Yet this is the wrong attitude. Our failures and imperfection are given to us to build upon, and to learn from.

The Mishnah tells us to delve into the Torah, again and again, never to lose hope. You fall? Well use that as the building block for your next step, and delve again. Age must never be a barrier. Life serves up challenges at each stage, yet everything can be found in the light of the Torah!

We seem to seek perfection in ourselves, and in others. This is like seeking the magical diet that in truth never exists. We will falter, but we build on that and become greater.

Unfortunately, I can't say that about diets. Eating more only increases girth. Oh well, you can't have everything.